

Evaluating the success of the Great Society *The Washington Post*

Lyndon B. Johnson's visionary set of legislation turns 50

In just under five years in the 1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson enacted nearly 200 pieces of legislation known as the Great Society, an unprecedented and bold set of programs aimed at improving Americans' everyday lives.

Fifty years later, we examine the success of this enormous volume of programs, many of which are so mundane and ordinary, it's hard to imagine a time without them.

On May 22, 1964, in a University of Michigan commencement speech, President Lyndon B. Johnson formally launched the most ambitious set of social programs ever undertaken in the United States—surpassing even Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in its range and in its ambition to transform the country.

Most of the Great Society's achievements came during the 89th Congress, which lasted from January 1965 to January 1967, and is considered by many to be the most productive legislative session in American history. Johnson prodded Congress to churn out nearly 200 new laws launching civil rights protections; Medicare and Medicaid; food stamps; urban renewal; the first broad federal investment in elementary and high school education; Head Start and college aid; an end to what was essentially a whites-only immigration policy; landmark consumer safety and environmental regulations; funding that gave voice to community action groups; and an all-out War on Poverty.

Here are the Great Society's key achievements and biggest failures.

Civil Rights

On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. "We believe that all men are created equal," Johnson said in an address to the country. "Yet many are denied equal treatment."

The law outlawed discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion or sex. It also authorized the attorney general to bring lawsuits against schools practicing segregation and discouraged job discrimination through the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In fiscal 2013, there were 93,727 charges filed with the agency; 35.3 percent involved race and 29.5 percent were based on alleged sex discrimination.

Johnson later added to those protections with the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, parts of which were rescinded by the Supreme Court in 2013, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which sought to eliminate discrimination in housing.

Johnson did away with literacy tests some Southern states required voters to take; black voter registration rates in those states increased an average of 67 percent from 1964 to 1968. In 1970, there were 1,469 black elected officials in the United States; by November 2011, there were more than 10,500.

Critics, noting how much progress has been made on racial equality, argue that some aspects of the civil rights laws are no longer needed. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court eliminated some parts of the Voting Rights Act, and earlier this month, it upheld the state of Michigan's move to ban affirmative action.

War on Poverty

On Aug. 20, 1964, Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, the foundation of the War on Poverty. It established the Office of Economic Opportunity to direct and coordinate educational, employment and training programs that laid its groundwork.

Between 1965 and 1968, spending to help the poor doubled; within 10 years, the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line declined to 12 percent from 20 percent. The rate has fluctuated greatly in the past 50 years. According to the census, 15.9 percent of Americans lived in poverty in 2012, which is just a couple of points lower than where the Census estimates it stood in 1965.

But the president's Council of Economic Advisers uses a broader measure — including tax credits and benefits such as food assistance — that estimates that poverty has dropped by more than a third, from more than 25 percent of the population in the mid-1960s to 16 percent in 2012.

“Today for the first time in all the history of the human race, a great nation is able to make and is willing to make a commitment to eradicate poverty among its people,” Johnson said in the Rose Garden.

Among other things it spawned was the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965, which was designed to help pull Appalachia, where one-third of residents lived below the poverty line, out of hardship, develop its industries and provide educational and health-care opportunities to its residents. Today, the Appalachian Regional Commission is a federal-state partnership that helps fund a number of projects in the region in areas including energy, infrastructure, highways and telecommunications.

The Office of Economic Opportunity, which ran the War on Poverty, was abolished in 1981.

Education

On April 11, 1965, Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in front of Junction School in Johnson City, Tex., which he attended. The act committed the federal government to help, for the first time, local school districts whose students come from low-income families.

“As a son of a tenant farmer, I know that education is the only valid passport from poverty,” Johnson, who taught at a Hispanic school in an impoverished town before launching his political career, said at the signing. “As a former teacher – and, I hope, a future one – I have great expectations of what this law will mean for all of our young people. As president of the United States, I believe deeply no law I have signed or will ever sign means more to the future of America.”

A month later, Head Start launched, a program designed to give underprivileged children a “head start” before starting first grade. Lady Bird Johnson served as honorary chair of the program. Head Start has served more than 31 million children from birth to age 5 since 1965. In 2012-13, 1.13 million children and pregnant women were served by Head Start, according to the program. The vast majority – 82 percent – were children ages 3 and 4.

Later in 1965, Johnson launched the Higher Education Act, meant to open up college to anyone who wanted to attend through scholarships and low-income loans. It also established a national teacher corps.

In the 1963-64 school year, \$879 million in federal grants were given to students, almost all to veterans or members of the military, and \$849 million was doled out in student loans. In 2012-13, students received \$185.1 billion in aid; federal loans constituted 37 percent of that total and federal grants 24 percent, according to the College Board.

Health

Johnson signed an amendment to the Social Security Act creating Medicaid and Medicare, health insurance programs for the elderly and low-income individuals and families, in a ceremony at the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Mo., on July 30, 1965.

“No longer will older Americans be denied the healing miracle of modern medicine. No longer will illness crush and destroy the savings that they have so carefully put away over a lifetime so that they might enjoy dignity in their later years. No longer will young families see their own incomes, and their own hopes, eaten away simply because they are carrying out their deep moral obligations to their parents, and to their uncles, and their aunts,” Johnson said. “And no longer will this nation refuse the hand of justice to those who have given a lifetime of service and wisdom and labor to the progress of this progressive country.”

In 1966 about 19 million people – all of them elderly – were enrolled in Medicare. By 2010, just under 47 million people – both elderly and disabled – participated in the program. In 1975, about 22 million people were served by Medicaid; currently, 62 million people participate in the program.

Arts and Media

On Nov. 7, 1967, Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act, providing financial assistance for non-commercial television and radio broadcasting, including PBS and NPR. Have you watched “Sesame Street” or “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood”? Thank the Great Society.

Today there are 987 stations nationwide – most locally owned and operated – that broadcast NPR programming.

The Great Society also led to the fruition of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington and created the National Endowment for the Humanities, which is one of the largest arts and culture funders in the United States.

Environment

On Nov. 21, 1967, Johnson signed the Air Quality Act, which granted the government increased authority to control air pollution.

“Don’t we really risk our own damnation every day by destroying the air that gives us life?” Johnson asked in the East Room of the White House. “I think we do. We have done it with our science, our industry, and our progress. Above all, we have really done it with our own carelessness – our own continued indifference and our own repeated negligence.”

Johnson’s action made many realize that clean air was vital. But the act designated a regional approach to combating air pollution, something many thought would be difficult to enforce. So in 1970, Congress passed the Clean Air Act, which laid out nationwide standards for pollution control. According to the EPA, cars are 99 percent cleaner for common pollutants now than in 1970.

Johnson also pushed through the Water Quality Act, which required states to establish and enforce water quality standards for interstate waterways, and the Endangered Species Act, which provided threatened animals with limited protection for the first time. Currently there are 1,190 species of plants and animals on the U.S. endangered species list.

He also signed the Wilderness Act, which preserved 9.2 million acres as federal wilderness areas; the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which established a national system to protect and preserve rivers; and the National Trails System Act, which created a nationwide system of scenic and recreational trails.

Housing and Urban Development

The Omnibus Housing Bill of 1965 was a \$7.5 billion measure that Johnson called “the single most important breakthrough” in housing in decades. “And in the years to come I believe this act will become known as the single most important housing legislation in our history,” Johnson said at a Rose Garden signing ceremony on Aug. 10, 1965. The bill provided hefty rent subsidies for low-income people who moved into new housing projects, created grants to help low-income homeowners rehabilitate their properties, aided small businesses displaced by urban renewal and grants to rehabilitate blighted urban property. Johnson signed the Housing and Urban Development Act in 1965, which created the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a Cabinet-level agency.

The Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 gave federal money to rebuild and revitalize poor, blighted urban areas. “The Congress hereby finds and declares that improving the quality of urban life is the most critical domestic problem facing the United States,” the law read. It led to the creation of “city demonstration agencies,” or planning agencies to review development proposals that now exist in virtually all metropolitan areas.

The Community Action Program created Community Action Agencies, nonprofits dedicated to fighting poverty at the local level. “Through a new Community Action program, we intend to strike at poverty at its source – in the streets of our cities and on the farms of our countryside among the very young and the impoverished old. This program asks men and women throughout the country to prepare long-range plans for the attack on poverty in their own local communities,” Johnson told Congress on March 16, 1964. Today there are about 1,100 Community Action Agencies nationwide. According to their national membership organization the agencies help 17 million people each year.

Not all programs were successes. The Model Cities program, for instance, was shut down in 1974 after largely failing in its efforts at urban renewal.

Consumer Protection

The Great Society produced a number of laws to protect consumers, including truth-in-packaging requirements which Johnson said will “will mean that the American family will get full and fair value for every penny, dime and dollar that that family spends,” at a bill signing in November 1966. Also part of his suite of bills on consumer protection were the truth-in-lending for borrowers and meat and poultry laws to enhance food safety. It created the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Child Safety Act to ensure that toys, medicine bottles and other products were safe for both children and adults.

“It will ban the sale or use of toys and other children’s articles that contain dangerous or deadly substances. It will ban the sale of other household articles so hazardous that even labels cannot make them safe. Now there is a law that says the eyes of a doll will not be poisonous beans. Now there is a law that says what looks like candy will not be deadly firecracker balls. Now there is a law that says Johnny will not die because his toy truck was painted with a poison. Both these laws offer sweeping new protection to the American family,” Johnson said.

If you’ve ever purchased a pack of cigarettes, you’ve seen this warning: “Caution: Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous to Your Health” and have Johnson’s Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act to thank.

Immigration

Standing at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, Johnson signed the Immigration Act on Oct. 3, 1965. It abolished the national origins formula that had been in place since 1924, meaning that preference was no longer given to immigrants from some European countries.

“This system violated the basic principle of American democracy – the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man,” Johnson said. “It has been un-American in the highest sense.”

The law greatly increased the number of immigrants from Asia, Africa and other parts of the world, though it continued to restrict the number of immigrants allowed into the United States each year. In 1965, 296,697 people obtained legal permanent resident status; in 2012, 1.03 million people became legal permanent residents. From 1960 to 1969, there were 358,563 people from Asia who became legal permanent residents. In 2012 alone, 416,488 people from Asia were granted that status, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

SOURCES: LBJ Presidential Library, Collegeboard.org, National Endowment for the Humanities, Census Bureau, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, Department of Homeland Security. GRAPHIC: Kennedy Elliott, Greg Manifold, Jade-Snow Joachim, Karen Tumulty and Katie Zezima. Published May 17, 2014.